

Tourism Expert Recommendation and Review Panel
Meeting Minutes
Monday, April 4, 2016
4:00 p.m.

Present- Cheryl Armstrong, EMU Auxiliary Services; Brenda Black, Director of Tourism and Visitor Services; Caitlin Boyer, Young Adult; Christopher Jones, Mayor of Harrisonburg; Lisa Shull, Explore More Discovery Museum; Erica Kann, City Clerk; Adam Shifflett, Brothers Craft Brewing; Valerie Weaver, Ten Thousand Villages; Kristy Johnson, family; and, Anna Bergey, Funkhouser Home Team.

Mayor Jones thanked everyone for attending and asked Brenda if anything had been implemented since the last meeting. Brenda stated tourism contacted downtown restaurants and all kid menus are available at the Hardesty Higgins House (HHH) and will soon be available on the tourism's website.

Brenda stated that tourism found an event module through Tokify and they are hoping to incorporate the countdown feature on the website by July.

Mayor Jones stated he met with Ande Banks, assistant to the city manager, and Jenny Burden, Arts Council of the Valley, regarding the 50 friend's idea that was discussed during the previous meeting. Mayor Jones stated they seemed to like the idea and after brief discussion with the panel, the panel likes the idea that the "friends" remain the same shape, but can be adapted to the surrounding area, so it is easier for children to spot. The idea would be that Ande would work with the Arts Council on the panels' behalf to apply for grant funds. Lisa stated this idea is similar to the Duke Dog project when the museum partnered with an artist after ideas were submitted by community members and once the design was decided the children helped the artist paint the dog. Mayor Jones stated he wouldn't want to limit the various forms of art, but would like the shape of the mold to remain the same. Brenda also noted it would be similar to Virginia is for Lovers LOVE signs.

Mayor Jones asked what action step(s) could Harrisonburg take in the short term that would immediately enhance our tourism efforts. Mayor Jones feels a group with various stakeholders similar to this panel is important, but would like a more official structure. Caitlyn stated she spoke with Kyle Lawrence, bicyclist, that stated when he mentions he is from Harrisonburg, most people respond that is a place they plan to ride. Caitlyn stated bicyclist know about Harrisonburg and suggested placing packages on the website for people planning weekend trips. Adam stated that the collaboration between restaurants, lodging, etc. is important as it was discussed during the previous meeting. Brenda stated tourism is seeing an increase to packages being created and that the Stonewall Jackson Inn does a lot with cycling. Brenda

stated hotels work differently than bed and breakfasts with how packages are created. Brenda stated a page was located on the website that listed all packages and promotions, but the visibility was low and tourism was recommending local businesses to place their items on Virginia.org to get more visibility and to get Harrisonburg free national publicity for the packages being offered. Brenda stated a meeting needs to be held with all the lodging properties to get information about Harrisonburg, all the things happening around the area, and discuss sales missions, which is difficult because they don't want to share their consumer information. It was noted that it might help them to know where to come up with a cycling package, etc and where to place it to be seen. Brenda stated there are some itineraries listed on the tourism website, but she will have to check to see if there are any cycling packages. It was suggested the cycling experts should put together itineraries, so that it is safe for tourists. It was also noted it is best for cyclists to visit the bicycle shops the day of their ride due to changing factors.

Mayor Jones asked if there are value packages offered for newcomers and current community. Brenda noted the itineraries are available to help families know what is happening around the area as well as a list of "free things to do". Brenda stated with tourism, she is looking for packages that will provide revenues, but the visitor's center is well equipped to handle those inquiries. Brenda encouraged the group to look at the website to see if there are itineraries missing. Mayor Jones asked Anna if she was aware of the page and if she sent people to the website when they are searching for homes in Harrisonburg. Anna stated at Funkhouser Realty they have a Relocation Guide and she would look to see if the tourism website is listed within their guide. Anna stated she wasn't sure if other realtors had a guide such as theirs.

Anna had asked about the individuals that are choosing to stay at our hotels. Brenda stated with the demographics provided by the hotels they are pass through group tour markets, leisure, and business. Brenda noted majority of families stay at the resort for week long vacations. Mayor Jones noted a lot of the graduation families aren't staying in our area, which could be a major revenue time for the city. Brenda noted over the last several years, families are staying in surrounding areas due to the prices of Harrisonburg hotels during graduation. It was noted during the previous year hotels were at 70% capacity. Brenda noted they receive monthly reports and revenues for mid and high end properties which were strong this year, but with the renovations at the Holiday Inn their numbers will see a decrease.

Brenda asked who have we not targeted and how do we target them with the funding available. Mayor Jones suggested geotargeting or geofencing, drawing a digital circle around DC or the breweries within DC. Mayor Jones stated the "what" would be different for what it is that we are looking to advertise. Mayor Jones provided an example of when walking into the Smithsonian ads for the Explore More Children's Museum would be placed on peoples phones.

Brenda stated this would be similar to when they targeted individuals going to Housekeeping and the Food Network website's to make them aware that Harrisonburg was a culinary district. Mayor Jones suggested adding layers to those being targeting. Mayor Jones also suggested to geofence the top five to six New Jersey jurisdictions that JMU students come from. Brenda noted that tourism is pulling a lot of their printed material in the upcoming year. Mayor Jones would like to see a percentage of the printed material go to families and newcomers. Brenda noted that the tourism department leaves local printed material up to Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance (HDR). Mayor Jones stated HDR doesn't advertise for the greater Harrisonburg, there focus is downtown. Caitlyn noted as a resident, she looks at the HDR website and she would send guests to the tourism website. Brenda noted that parks and recreation promotes events from their department. It was noted it seems like there is a gap between HDR and them focusing on the entire city. Mayor Jones stated the majority of the tourism budget should be focused on external tourists, but there should be a portion of the budget that should focus on the internal customers. Mayor Jones stated the internal customers are those that help our small community keep sustained. Brenda clarified internal customers shopping and dining is where the focus should be. Mayor Jones concurred. Brenda stated over the past years it has been up to the local shops and restaurants to advertise locally and not to use taxpayer dollars to advertise for them. Mayor Jones stated HDR takes care of downtown businesses and the majority of the other restaurants are chains that take care of themselves. Mayor Jones also stated he wants people to come here and to know where to go. It was noted the focus and message is going to be different for local individuals and families than how the tourism advertises. Brenda noted that it needs to be better defined of whose role it is when it comes to local advertising. Mayor Jones feels that HDR shouldn't be a part of the conversation because they are a non-profit to advocate for downtown. Lisa noted that majority of the museum's traffic comes from the tourism's website. Adam noted that he notices that they don't get a lot traffic from Charlottesville, but they receive traffic from Roanoke and DC for different reasons. Brenda stated there is something we should be able to offer both residence and the surrounding local areas.

There was brief conversation that local advertising shouldn't be placed on tourism, but it doesn't mean that tourism shouldn't play a role in connectivity. Brenda noted historically tourism hasn't taken care of advertising locally. Brenda noted that her budget is from the general fund (no specific allocation) and grants. Brenda noted that the community is great and helpful with creativity. Brenda stated collectively tourism is doing programs that support local businesses. Brenda believes the local marketing the city provides is the HHH. Brenda stated the HHH is the orientation to everything within the city and to send new businesses and staff members to get equipped. Caitlyn suggested getting the HHH digitally, such as a virtual welcome. Caitlyn noted that she had a group in town over the weekend, but they finished after the HHH closed so they were unable to visit. Caitlyn stated she had printed out information for

the group about First Fridays prior to the event, so she could provide the group with the happenings of downtown. Brenda stated tourism just hired a full-time person to run the HHH and there have been some improvements made through technology. Brenda also noted that the HHH staff has begun to go to local events to help spread the word. Brenda stated that the city also uses trip advisors to help consumers find what they are looking for.

Lisa stated she feels that they struggle to spread the word about their children's museum and would like to be better friends to others in the community and know how to promote their attraction. Lisa asked if there were seminars or if meetings could be created to present what the children's museum has to offer. Brenda noted on May 4, 2016 at Sunny Slope Farm a Lunch and Learn event will take place and the classes include social media, grant opportunities, digital marketing, tourism funding opportunities, and other programs. Brenda feels there is a better way to connect with the hotels to create opportunities for local attractions. After further discussion about social media and the children's museum, Brenda also stated she would talk to Lisa more about the Kids Trail.

At 5:00 p.m., Brenda closed the meeting. The next meeting will be held Monday, May 2, 2016.